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DEPARTMENT OF STATE


BRIEFING MEMORANDUM

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April 15, 1976

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TO: The Secretary

FROM: IO - Samuel W. Lewis 

Trends Report  
The Future of the Security Council

The Council has been exceptionally busy; but beyond that, the kinds of items which come before it, the way it is handling them, and the role of the smaller powers, may all indicate an evolution of importance to us. In sum, the Council may be growing as a significant arena for carrying out conflict resolution diplomacy, particularly related to regional disputes; and the smaller countries may increasingly be perceiving the Council as part of a world structure in which they can play a meaningful role. There are also, however, some substantial risks inherent in the current developments.

In this memorandum, we describe the key things that have been happening, point out the main risks, and outline the factors that seem positive from our standpoint.

1. What has been happening? These are the key trends:

-- During recent months, the Council has been busier than it has been in any comparable period during the last 10 years. The total of 38 meetings on 8 topics during the first three months of this year is well over twice the average number in the same period (in any single year) since 1967. It seems virtually certain, based on what we can now foresee, that the present year is likely to be the heaviest in a decade--even if there is no major conflict which preoccupies the Council.

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-- The explanation lies partly in the fact that this year there are heightened pressures to "solve" long-standing issues in Southern Africa and the Middle East. The rising status of revolutionary regimes and movements in both areas also contributes to increased diplomatic pressures, including by recourse to the Security Council, in order to achieve gains which would be more costly if pursued purely through conflict.

-- The Council is also being utilized increasingly as an arena for considering some of the smaller regional disputes, like the Comoros Islands, Iceland's complaint against the UK, the border incident at Djibouti, Spanish Sahara, and Timor. This development may well be a function of the general receding of East-West conflict from center stage.

-- A gradual shift has continued away from the great powers playing the most central and active diplomatic roles, to a situation in which the medium-sized powers, particularly the non-aligned Council members, generally initiate items, float resolutions, and conduct negotiations. Although we have assets which can be utilized, neither we nor our friends are now predominant actors.

-- While we can no longer consistently manage satisfactory outcomes, the Soviet role is not predominant either, despite their recent political gains in Southern Africa and their support of the radical Arabs. We think that Soviet influence may, if anything, be declining. Radicals probably tend to assume Soviet support for almost any "non-aligned cause"; and moderates have little expectation of finding help through constructive Soviet inputs, as opposed, for example, to those of the UK or Sweden. So there is neither much need, nor advantage, in seeking to "negotiate" with the Soviets. Moreover, Soviet prestige has undoubtedly declined as a result of the unproductive, predictable, and often embarrassing verbal fracas between them and the Chinese.

-- The Council's way of doing its business has generally become more serious and responsible. Although there are still rhetorical excesses at Council meetings and some arbitrary pushing of extreme language to the vote, a large amount of the Council's business is carried out in relatively careful and quiet corridor negotiations.

-- Our exercise of the veto has become an accepted feature of the diplomatic landscape. People may differ on whether in a particular case we utilize our veto judiciously, but the important factor, it seems to us, is the general absence of moral outrage or hostility toward us when we do use it. On Middle East issues, however, frequent use of the veto could strengthen the hand of radical Arabs as against moderates, and heighten interest in turning to General Assembly Uniting-For-Peace procedures.

2. What are the dangers and uncertainties in this evolving situation? There are shoals which lie ahead:

-- Recourse to the Council can be abused by extremists or by impatient and inexperienced governments. Radical Arabs, sometimes instigated by the PLO, can bring frivolous or harassing cases against Israel. Regarding the recent case involving South African presence in Angola, we almost succeeded in avoiding the holding of an unnecessary meeting, since South African presence was being terminated; but radical African attitudes and an inability of moderates to control the situation, led to a somewhat sour ending.

-- We can expect that non-aligned countries, especially the radicals, will try to use the threat, and the actuality, of Security Council meetings to exert diplomatic pressures on us. In particular, the Arabs will attempt to use Council meetings as a means of stimulating us to push Israel to make concessions. And, as in the past, we will continue to some extent to be vulnerable to efforts to isolate us from our Western friends.

-- There will be continuing risk of a breakdown of the present Security Council system as a result of rebellion against the special status and power of the permanent members. There has been discussion of possible Arab or African attempts to move issues to the General Assembly when blocked in the Council, using the Uniting-For-Peace-procedures. Since these procedures were earlier developed at American initiative, we would face at the very least an awkward situation if the General Assembly recommended peacekeeping forces or even enforcement measures with respect to Israel or Namibia which we had vetoed in the

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Council. We do not assess this risk as very great at the moment, but whether it grows or recedes will, of course, depend at least partly on progress outside the UN.

-- Greater use of the Council for smaller regional disputes could raise question of whether the Council's "coinage" would be degraded, or even whether the system might become clogged in much the same way that General Assembly committees have become burdened with vast amounts of trivial business. These are fair questions; however, we do not believe that these risks outweigh the advantage in a larger number of UN members believing that the Security Council is part of a system which can help them in meeting their security needs. Moreover, there does not yet seem to be any serious problem of finding time to conduct a great deal more Security Council business.

3. Are there aspects of the present situation which are positive from our standpoint? We think there are three broad aspects which can be in our long-term interests:

-- The Council seems increasingly to be viewed as a usable part of a much larger diplomatic process. We, ourselves, have often pointed out that maintenance of Middle East peacekeeping forces permits the parties to gain time and to preserve negotiating options. There are many other ways in which the Security Council can interrelate with a larger diplomatic process. For example, even the prospect of a Council meeting can lead interested countries to take steps and undertake negotiations which they might not otherwise, as in the case of the private discussions which facilitated South Africa's withdrawal from Angola. It seems to us healthy and realistic that the Council is being viewed less and less as a judicial or administrative organ, which somehow fails unless it disposes definitively of the problems brought before it.

-- Greater recourse to the Security Council, even by radicals bent on creating pressures against us and our friends, is preferable to pursuit of extreme objectives exclusively through violence. Although the pressures stimulated by the radicals may often be uncomfortable and even offensive, it will generally be easier to keep negotiations going and to protect our own interests to the extent that there is not a pervasive backdrop of violence.

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-- Finally, smaller countries increasingly see the Council as part of a structure in which they can effectively participate. Over-all we believe it is encouraging that the Council's activities are generally being carried out in a way that promotes the broad goal which you set forth in your last General Assembly speech--the building of a world system in which both the large and the small powers have a genuine stake.

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It is difficult to predict whether there will be positive evolution or deterioration in the Security Council in the future. Much will depend on events outside the United Nations. And we cannot control whether others act responsibly or irresponsibly. But we still have it in our power through our own behavior to make a significant impact on the shaping of Security Council work. Factors of importance will include:

-- Whether we continue in appropriate major cases to carry out diplomatic consultations in advance--such as those which you directed prior to this January's Middle East debate--consultations that can either significantly increase our chances of achieving acceptable results or minimize the risk of damaging repercussions when a satisfactory outcome cannot be achieved.

-- Whether we are able to concert successfully with friends in order to prevent our antagonists from isolating us.

-- Whether we exploit skillfully the opportunities which may exist to influence Council negotiations, particularly with the help of our friends, in order to strengthen the feeling of most participants that the Council is a forum to be taken seriously and in order to prevent extremists from demonstrating that our participation is limited to casting a veto.

-- Whether we are able to hold our use of the veto to those situations where it is essential to protect our own vital national interests.

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While the extent of progress in the future cannot be predicted, the stakes that face us are clear. If the present Security Council system breaks down, for example as a result of confrontational use of Uniting-For-Peace procedures, we might never be able again to re-establish a structure in which we have the same recognized powers that we now possess. But of even more importance, the present situation, however uncertain, holds some potential of the Security Council becoming an increasingly flexible and useful element of the international diplomatic system.

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